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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 LILONGWE 000261

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KPAO](#) [OIIP](#) [MI](#)

SUBJECT: INFLUENCE ANALYSIS - MALAWI

REF: STATE 33359

¶1. (SBU) The information environment in Malawi has changed drastically in the ten years since multi-party democracy was instituted. During the previous 30-year regime of President for Life Hastings Banda, the information environment was completely closed. All news was censored and freedom of speech did not exist. Today, freedom of speech is a right that is exercised and the private media is largely free. State-run media still exists, however, and the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) radio is the only medium that reaches the entire population. State-run television, initiated in 1999, reaches the urban elite. Both are tightly controlled by the government and focus on ruling party news. MBC remains the main source of media news for most Malawians and due to low literacy and education rates, accessing information from other sources is difficult, thus making it a challenge for most people to make informed choices.

¶2. (SBU) Private media is an important part of the information environment. Two daily newspapers (circulation approx. 15,000), read mostly by the urban elite, are considered to be independent and influential (although as politics change, the level of influence by the government over the editorial policies and the slant of the papers change also). One opposition weekly is held in high regard by the public and takes pride in its investigative journalism. An assortment of weekly papers appears, sometimes irregularly, and all are mouthpieces of certain parties or the government and are not highly regarded as influential. Private electronic media are the most independent media in Malawi and are increasingly influential. Although the broadcasts are restricted to Lilongwe and Blantyre and surrounding areas, the influence is felt throughout the country. Capital Radio, established in 1999, airs daily call-in talk shows on a variety of political and social issues - a first for Malawi. Capital is also the VOA affiliate. Community and religious stations, a popular music station and a university station round out the electronic media - all are influential with their respective audiences. BBC broadcasts to most of Malawi as well, but its influence is less than local stations and it only broadcasts in English.

¶3. (SBU) Other than the media, the most important source of public influence in Malawi are the religious institutions. Internet availability is minimal, telephone service is restricted to the elite, much of the population is illiterate and other sources of information are not available. Most people are highly religious, however, and churches and mosques play an important role in society. Faith leaders have taken an active role in politics and were instrumental in bringing down the regime of Hastings Banda. Faith leaders lead their flocks spiritually and politically. Churches and mosques are community centers as well as places of worship and offer an important center for information exchange.

¶4. (SBU) NGOs, academics, schools, traditional leaders and donors also influence public opinion. Malawi is extremely donor-dependent and thus the population and the government place great importance on the opinion of the donors. The NGO community is growing, but is still not organized or established enough to be a force on its own. Academics are often relied on to comment on political issues, but their influence as academics is not significant. Many academics also have political aspirations or connections,

however, so that their opinions are sought on various levels. Primary and secondary schools influence the youth. Village chiefs and other traditional authorities are important influences at the village level.

15. (SBU) For democracy and governance MPP goals, a variety of groups are targeted. Personal contact remains the most effective way to reach the opinion-makers, especially because the pool of influential decision-makers is relatively limited. Demarches are used with government officials, but targeted exchanges, invitations to representational events and invitations to attend or take part in U.S. Speaker programs are also effective. Individual dialogue with faith leaders and NGOs is important. Outreach through the media, using op-eds, live or recorded interviews or placement of Washington-produced materials, can be effective in communicating with most democracy and governance interlocutors, such as churches, mosques, government officials, political parties, parliament, the military and the media itself. Information dissemination - using electronic journals, post-produced products or access to American Corners - is an effective means of communicating with many groups in this category. The U.S Speaker program, cultural programs and radio programs are important means of communicating with youth audiences, such as secondary or university students.

16. (SBU) For economic development MPP goals, the business community is an important target audience. The main approach to the private sector is through the Ambassador's Quarterly Business Lunch, which serves as a de facto American Chamber of Commerce. The Malawi Federated Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Economists Association of Malawi, the Trade Policy National Working Group and the National Action Group are the important players in economic development. The influence of labor leaders is far less than in the past, largely due to the lack of organization and cohesion in the labor movement. Contacts with private businesses, outreach through electronic journals, radio, visits from U.S. companies and the U.S. speaker program are all used in outreach efforts. Key government institutions, such as the Reserve Bank and the Ministry of Finance, are most often approached with either an official demarche or an invitation to a representational event.

17. (SBU) Global health goals target government organizations and NGOs. The health NGO network is becoming more organized, and workshops, information sharing and partnerships are effective ways of communicating and cooperating. Government organizations, including the National AIDS Commission, work closely with NGOs and donors. They are usually best reached by direct contact and cooperation in the form of technical assistance. Media has proved useful in addressing mass audiences and the youth, particularly with HIV/AIDS messages. Schools are also an important outlet for communicating with younger audiences.

18. (SBU) Public diplomacy is used to implement and reinforce the above goals. Target groups consist of a broad spectrum of the Malawi public and government. U.S. Speaker programs, interactive dialogues, the media, information dissemination, workshops and personal contact are all used to further MPP goals. Public diplomacy has specifically targeted Muslim audiences through personal outreach, radio and the U.S. Speaker program. Workshops that have focused on biotech, HIV/AIDS, lobbying and the media have all been effective. Radio and television appearances by Mission staff and visiting speakers are superb ways to reach a large audience. The Public Affairs Section quarterly newsletter is widely distributed and is another outreach tool.